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Adult education, democracy, and totalitarianism: A case study of the German Democratic Republic (1949-1990)

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Abstract

This article explores the role of adult education in supporting democracy through an examination of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) (1949-1990). This case study presents the institutional landscape, political regulations, and key trends of adult education in the GDR, complemented by insights from educators who worked within the field during the 1970s through 1990s. Two key categories emerge from the findings: (1) 'Learning society': Opportunities, access, and control of learning; and (2) Coexistence of conformity and resistance. Interviews highlight the diverse aspects of adult education in the GDR. While some programmes facilitated access to education, culture, and certain professions that would have otherwise been unattainable, the indoctrinative, centralised, and state-controlled education system promoted a predefined societal model and sought to mould a specific personality type, aligning with the vision of a totalitarian learning society, which clashes with the fundamental values of adult education and creates a contradictory situation for adult educators.

Keywords: democracy, indoctrination, resistance, GDR, authoritarianism

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Introduction

Democracy is always under threat, and lifelong civic learning is essential if it is to survive and function (Biesta, 2011; Dewey, 1916; Negt, 2010). To better understand the current precariousness of democracy, it is helpful to look at a previous instance when adult education served anti-democratic interests. In this article, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which existed from 1949 to 1990, will be presented as a case study. By examining the experiences of this particular *dictatorship under the guise of a democracy*, we address the role of adult education as a supporter of democracy or totalitarianism.

In characterising the GDR as a totalitarian state, we draw upon the influential definition of totalitarianism by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), who defined it by a six-point pattern: 1) an official ideology aspiring towards a utopian society, 2) a single hierarchical party, 3) a system of terror through secret police, 4) party control of mass communication, 5) party control of the military, and 6) central control of the entire economy (pp. 21-22). Accordingly, the characteristics of the GDR state structure qualify it as totalitarian. When we use the term 'indoctrination', we understand it as a systematic and deliberate strategy that employs specific doctrines and values to shape and control human behavior in predetermined ways, while disregarding the individual's autonomy and personal choice (Böhm & Seichter, 2018, p. 231).

This case study has two sources of data. First, drawing from historical accounts, we provide an overview of the institutional structures, political regulations, and key trends of adult education in the GDR. Second, data are presented from interviews we conducted with educators who worked in adult education in the GDR. By examining the experiences of these educators, we explore the complexities of adult education under a totalitarian regime and hope to contribute to a more nuanced view of the subject. The interview data are retrospective constructions characterised by selected memories and ex post facto interpretations (Hoggan-Kloubert, 2024); as such, they provide insights into the lived educational practice with 'a subjective refraction and processing' (Tietgens, 1993, p. 11; translated by the authors).

Drawing from the emancipatory tradition of adult education, which has its European roots in the Enlightenment and has been reinforced by critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), we emphasize the need to continue the academic discourse regarding the values of adult education, such as autonomy, solidarity, and pluralism (Hufer, 2016; Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023). Additionally, this examination reinforces the importance of adult education's traditional commitment to democracy (Zeuner, 2010; Boggs, 1991) and the need for continued focus on these core principles in the development and implementation of adult education programs and policies.

Historical background

Adult education in Germany experienced growth during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), which was the first attempt at republican democracy in German history. The government emphasized the importance of adult education by granting constitutional status (the first and to date only time) and invested in programs aimed at improving adult workers' education and job skills. Trade unions and political parties also offered adult education courses (Borinski & Friedenthal-Haase, 2014). During the Nazi dictatorship (1933-1945), there was a suppression of democratic adult education movements; nevertheless, the Weimar period marked a turning point in the development of adult education in Germany and laid the foundation for future growth.

After World War II, Germany was initially divided into four occupation zones (1945-1949) and then into two states. The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) was established as a democratic government, rebuilt with the economic help of the Marshall Plan. Although people in West Germany cannot be said to have lived in a democratic or egalitarian utopia, they at least enjoyed freedom of speech, religion, and the press and elected their government through free and fair elections. East Germany, under Soviet control, became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and, despite its name, was far from the characteristics of a democratic state. The one-party communist government monitored the population and did not tolerate dissent, with staged elections and only a facade of democracy (Jesse, 2005).

Initially, many adult education providers in the GDR sought to provide a more egalitarian system of education, in reaction to their view of the classist and fascist approaches of the Weimar and Nazi dictatorship regimes, respectively. The government, however, decided that such egalitarianism was best accomplished by using education to build the *perfect* society through the creation of a *socialist personality* and a culture of conformity. According to the definition in the GDR literature, adult education was intended:

> to continue the all-round development of personality, the ability to further develop the initiatives and creativity of all citizens, to deepen education and training, to impart and acquire knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and all other sciences, progressive tradition, and cultural values, to expand the interests and to develop socialist consciousness and socialist behavior. (Schneider et al., 1988, p. 9; translated by the authors)

Certainly, some core elements of this definition align with democratic concepts of adult education. The GDR's definition of adult education, however, placed a strong emphasis on inculcating a specific (i.e., Marxist-Leninist) ideology. The requirement to form a specific type of socialist consciousness highlights the political agenda behind the adult education programs in the GDR, which sought to control the thoughts and beliefs of the population. This use of adult education diverged from its more traditional conception following the legacies of the Enlightenment, which strove to support the development of democratic citizens through the promotion of free inquiry, personal growth, and the pursuit of knowledge and skills for their own sake (Deutscher Ausschuß für das Erziehungs- und Bildungswesen, 1960, p. 20).

To the extent that the GDR endorsed lifelong learning and personal development, it was only within the parameters of a structured state-guided system. The predominant focus on professional and academic qualifications for adults shaped the adult education landscape, with a tendency toward homogeneity and significant state intervention through educational policies. The state, in this context, did not allow for a personal or institutional autonomy in adult education, emphasizing instead a centralized and directed approach to learning and development (Knoll, 1999).

The GDR used adult education to shape the adults in its society. 'Their ways of thinking and behaving, their emotions and their will are influenced according to a given ideological norm' (Siebert, 1970, p. 148; translated by the authors). In cases where individuals deviated from the ideological norm, the goal was to change their consciousness and bring them back in line. According to Siebert (1970)[1], the GDR believed that people in a socialist society should never be released from the educational process at any stage of their lives (p. 149).

The content taught in adult education institutions was tightly controlled by the state, and it was deemed necessary for all teaching to conform to the state's ideology. Some adult education institutions faced criticism for not putting enough emphasis on the

ideological content. The *Volkshochschule* (VHS), or adult education centre, for example, was criticised at the 7th meeting of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in 1952 for its lack of attention to 'the propagation of Marxism-Leninism' (Gutsche, 1958, p. 70; translated by the authors). Company Academies were also instructed to prioritise the integration of political education with their vocational education programmes. In 1968, there was a push to enhance the political and ideological integration across all subjects in adult education, as it was observed that there was an 'insufficient political and ideological penetration of all subjects' (Schröer, 1968, p. 486; translated by the authors).

The focus on continuous professional development was intertwined with continuous political education, which had two primary objectives: 'Education to love the GDR was linked to education to hate Western imperialism and the opposition in one's own country' (Siebert, 1970, p. 48; translated by the authors). The selection of content was based solely on the *social value* of the educational materials and the extent to which it fit into the politically-, economically-, and culturally-driven tasks that were deemed important. As Lehmann (1950) framed it, 'Supply and demand should not be decisive, but the question should be asked whether the intended material fits into the tasks that are politically, economically and culturally conditioned and promising' (as cited in Siebert, 1970, p. 49; translated by the authors). The study circle (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*), a crucial form of dialogical work in adult education in the Weimar Republic, also faced distrust from the state structure in the GDR. Emmerling, the director of the *Volkshochschule* (VHS) in Halle, GDR, referred to the study circle as 'aimless debate' (Siebert, 1970, p. 81; translated by the authors).

Despite this forced service to an ideology, the first few years (1949-1955) of adult education in the GDR saw a willingness to experiment with different methods and organisations (Siebert, 1970, p. 41). The adult education system was tasked with instilling the new ideology and a corresponding work ethic in the population of the GDR through re-qualifications, new qualifications, and continuing professional education. The need for state control overshadowed the more innovative and participant-oriented didactics, and as a result, adult education and professional development increasingly took the form of knowledge transmission, with long-term courses and standardised curricula replacing the study circle as a form of learning.

This approach deviated from the principles of democratic adult education in several significant ways. First, the system subscribed to the belief that individuals required guidance throughout their lives and were malleable, with educational goals being exclusively determined by society and the state rather than also with the learners themselves (Friedenthal-Haase, 2000, p. ix). Second, education was frequently intertwined with propaganda, with the principle of voluntary participation often disregarded, as demonstrated by the requirement for participation in political events (Siebert, 1970, p. 329). Finally, education was reduced to ideological training, with a focus on prescribed (ideological) content transmission.

Institutions of adult education in the GDR

The examination of institutional frameworks in adult education within the GDR is extensively chronicled through the substantial contributions of Siebert (1970; 2001), Knoll (1990) and Opelt (2004, 2005). More concise overviews by Olbertz (1994) and Trier (2010) offer additional perspectives on the educational landscape in the GDR. The commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Volkshochschulen (VHS) in Germany prompted numerous publications on institutional history (e.g., Klemm et al., 2019;

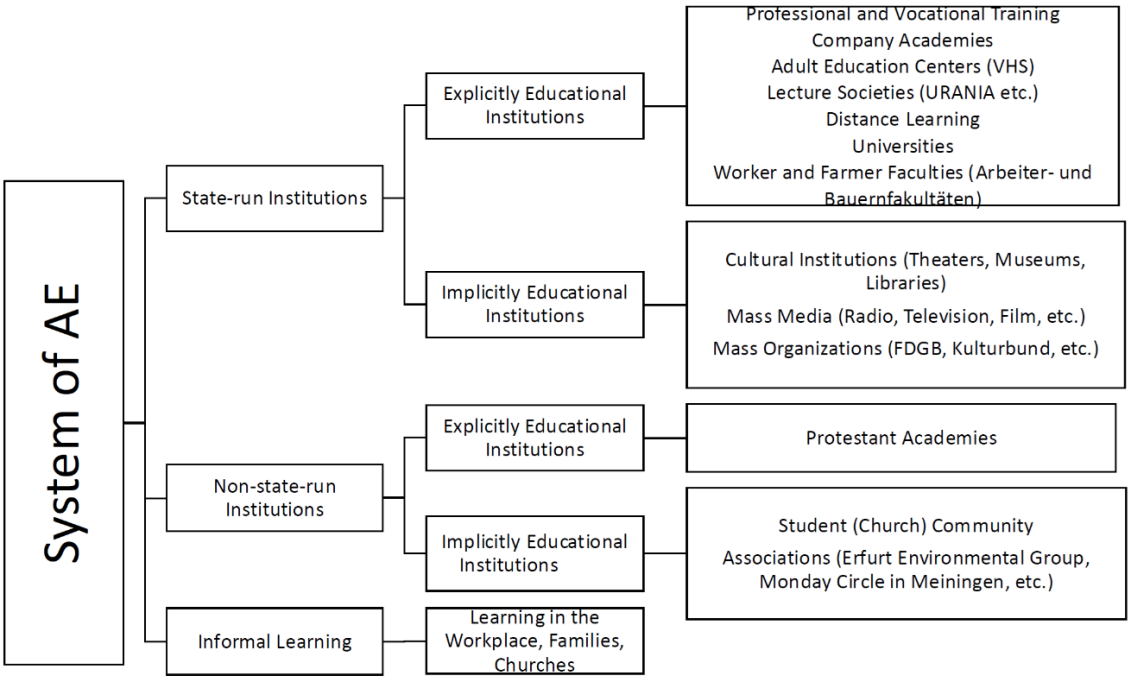
Meilhammer, 2019). Although this article cannot provide an exhaustive picture of adult education in the GDR, it seeks to highlight certain tensions, challenges, and pitfalls inherent in the landscape of adult education within a totalitarian regime.

Adult education in the GDR had a political and ideological orientation towards the Soviet Union. In 1946, the first (and also last) joint conference of all German adult education centre directors took place in Berlin. Siebert (1970) reasons that the personal contacts at that time were still quite intensive and based on relationships from the Weimar Republic (p. 33); however, the internal German technical communication had decreased significantly with the new course of the GDR. The ideologization and state control of learning meant that VHS in the GDR could hardly be compared with the institutions of the same name in West Germany; the ones in the GDR were more like the evening schools based on the Soviet model (p. 65).

Even if the institutional landscape in the GDR was essentially the same as in West Germany (e.g., Volkshochschulen, university continuing education, academies), there were still significant differences in the content, didactics, and ideological orientations of education. All educational work in the GDR was subordinated to the stately ideological doctrine and standardised in terms of educational theory (Siebert, 1970). With the enactment of the 'Law on a Unified Socialist Education System' (Gesetz über das einheitliche sozialistische Bildungssystem, 1965), the nationalisation and centralisation of adult education and its integration into the public education system was cemented.

The nationalisation of the adult education system in the GDR had at least one advantage: adult education was systematically expanded and developed into a comprehensive network. The effort was far-reaching, as the GDR targeted educational programs to societal groups that today are considered to be remote from education. Indeed, the scope and reach of adult education in the GDR has seldom been matched in any country. The following Figure 1 summarizes the wide range of programs and structures of education for adults that were offered at some point during the time period 1949-1990.

Figure 1. Systems of Adult Education in the GDR. Source: Authors' own figure



Volkshochschule

The *Volkshochschule* or VHS, which was established as a model of adult education at the beginning of the 20th century, was designed after the Danish system and experienced a time of flourishing in the Weimar Republic (1918-1933). The VHS were re-established after World War II, but in the GDR the institution abandoned its original mission, which had been as a school of democracy for everyone, tasked with 'educating the population in the spirit of democracy, anti-fascism and anti-militarism' (Siebert, 1970, p. 26; translated by the authors). Under the GDR, the VHS was subject to state control in all central areas, especially curriculum planning and instructor selection. The re-connection to the democratic tradition of the Weimar Republic was criticised and dismissed by the GDR officials and researchers. The educators of the Weimar Republic were acknowledged for having 'occasionally also brought well-considered ideas with them', but the new iteration of the VHS was able to overcome the 'unacceptable part of the legacy … relatively quickly and generally painlessly' (Emmerling, 1958, pp. 80-81; translated by the authors). Hence, the traditions of the Weimar Republic were discussed as lines of continuity in the early years, but the advocates of this legacy (the so-called reactionaries) were quickly silenced by the new party officials. The Soviet Military Administration in Germany's Order No. 22, decreed in 1946, demonstrates a deliberate break with the tradition of the Weimar Republic in terms of education policy. Central principles of adult education such as liberal values and subsidiarity were legally dissolved in favour of centralisation and nationalisation, and the so-called open event program (*offenes Veranstaltungsprogramm*) was also regulated (cf. Opelt, 2004, pp. 137-147). In 1949, the VHS was restructured into an evening high school for adults and adapted to the Soviet model.

On September 11, 1948, a 'work plan for adult education centres in Germany's Soviet Zone for 1948 to 1950' was published by the (East) German Administration for Public Education. Special emphasis was placed on an ideological orientation, which is visible in new innovations: 'Working groups for special questions of scientific socialism' were to be instituted, new materials on political-economic topics were to be developed, and lecturers in social sciences were to attend special advanced training courses to be ideologically prepared for their work (Arbeitsplan der VHSn der SBZ Deutschland für 1948-1950, as cited in Siebert, 1970, p. 30; translated by the authors). The directors, together with the Council of Teachers (*Dozentenrat*), were to develop work plans for their institutions, which then had to be approved by the Administration for Popular Education (Verwaltung für Volksbildung) (Siebert, 1970, p. 31). As illustrated by Gieseke and Opelt (2003) and Opelt (2004), the VHS constantly encountered limitations on its programmatic orientation and autonomous functioning. These constraints were imposed to fulfil pre-defined political objectives set by the state. Nevertheless, some VHS offered a selection of general education courses from the 1970s onwards, which corresponded to 'their classic traditional program offerings in the Weimar Republic' (Opelt, 2004, p. 218; translated by the authors).

Company Academies

Company Academies (*Betriebsakademien*) were institutions of adult education offering a solution to the shortage of workers after the war. They played a decisive role in continuing professional education and evening schools, which were important for updating educational qualifications. One innovation of the Company Academies was a tiered qualification system, which at the time of its creation in 1960 was progressive and

unique in Europe. This system provided that 'each section of the further training was designed as a basis for the next one, so that transitions were possible without an entrance examination' (Olbertz, 1994, p. 302; translated by the authors). For this purpose, framework curricula were developed 'which should ensure the comparability of the requirements and at the same time enable flexible adaptation to the respective operational requirements' (Siebert, 2001, p. 278; translated by the authors). During full-time employment, it was possible to advance from unskilled labour to university graduate. The orientation of the content changed again accordingly: the content of the qualification measures were not only the specific requirements of the job, but also contained overarching (political, ideological) priorities, detached from the immediate job requirements. It should be noted that access to the respective qualification measures was not open to everyone. Participation was only possible by selection, and only politically loyal employees were selected. Once selected, however, participation was mandatory. There were few options in terms of content. From the point of view of the companies, participation in educational programs had to align with the planned 'production and workforce planning' (Bramer, 1991, p. 424; translated by the authors).

Cultural centres and clubs

The goal of developing 'good state citizens' could not be realised without an extensive system of adult education, including both non-institutionalised (e.g., television, radio, libraries, museums) and institutionalised (Gesetz über das einheitliche sozialistische Bildungssystem, 1965) programs. The understanding of education 'in the collective and by the collective for conscious civic and moral behaviour' applied not only to children and young people, but also to vocational training and further education (Ramm, 1990, p. 42; translated by the authors). Accordingly, state-organised adult education in the GDR was characterised by various legal norms, leading to a 'centralistic and also dirigistic power of disposal over the educational system' (Knoll & Siebert, 1968, p. 36; translated by the authors).

Cultural centres and clubs (*Klub- und Kulturhäuser*), which historically provided various forms of cultural education, also became closely linked to the political vision of the state. Due to the restructuring of the VHS, the range of cultural education offerings narrowed, and new forms of institutionalised cultural adult education were developed. As early as the 1950s, cultural centres were spread in rural communities, where gatherings, meetings, training sessions, courses, and lectures took place. In December 1953, these cultural centres were subordinated to the Free German Trade Union Federation (FDGB) (Siebert, 1970, p. 283). In 1954, the FDGB published guidelines for educational content and activities in all trade union culture houses, clubs, culture rooms (red corners), and libraries. In addition to such recreational activities as concerts, theatre performances, dances, excursions, and sightseeing, political education was offered to 'strengthen confidence in the policies of the government and the party of the working class' through lectures, films, and exhibitions (Gutsche, 1958, p.118; translated by the authors).

As part of this work, the 'ideological-artistic level' of the folk-art groups were to be increased through 'regular rehearsals' or 'intensive training work' (Gutsche, 1958, p. 118; translated by the authors). Over time, these clubhouses and culture houses as institutions of cultural mass education continued to develop, as did the scope of the events (from approximately 320,000 participants in 1970 to almost 800,000 in 1988) and the number of visitors (from 35,000 in 1970 to almost 75,000 in 1988) (Staatliche Zentralverwaltung für Statistik, 1989, p. 322). The club- and culture houses served a 'comparatively large

majority and not a socially exclusive elite' (Siebert, 1970, p. 121; translated by the authors).

Gieseke and Opelt (2003) highlight the impressiveness of cultural education in the GDR, citing the abundance and diversity of programs and topics (p. 98). However, they emphasize that this diversity primarily revolved around 'classical high culture' (p. 198), due to its perceived lack of oppositional potential. It was a form of cultural education not geared toward fostering critical reflection on the culture in the society but rather towards adherence to a classical tradition. Even though it aimed to bridge the cultural gap between elites and the working class (p. 277), it fell short in providing a platform for reflection. Importantly, Gieseke and Opelt (2003) note that 'a vibrant culture can only develop when it rubs against the societal present' (p. 277; translated by the authors); cultural development thrives through interaction with the open present social environment. In the context of the GDR, this essential interaction was lacking.

Protestant Academies

The only institutions relatively critical towards the state were the Protestant Academies (*Evangelische Akademien*). Friedenthal-Haase (2007) describes these as 'principally different' (p. 429; translated by the authors) from the state-controlled adult education institutions of the GDR. Although tolerated by the state, they remained under constant surveillance. In individual cases, the lecturers and participants were intimidated – through 'defamation, intimidation and persecution of individuals' (p. 430; translated by the authors). These academies tried to follow the traditions of the popular education movement of the Weimar period, yet, because public funding and advertising for these activities were prohibited, the popularity of the Protestant Academies began to decline from the mid-1960s (Rothe, 2003, p. 269). Anti-church propaganda and secularization processes in the GDR contributed to this. Rothe (2003) points out that marginalisation prompted an upsurge in creative forms of work and new content; the church institutions developed a niche form for a culture of critical dialogue, which stood in contrast to the propaganda training practices of the state institutions. Their didactic-methodical norm was one of 'openness, genuine voluntariness and freedom' (Friedenthal-Haase, 2007, p. 435; translated by the authors). Participation required certain prerequisites (e.g., self-educational ability and willingness, critical thinking, a perceived belonging to or acceptance of the church), but also a willingness to accept certain disadvantages (e.g., defamation, intimidation, persecution) (p. 430). The existence of such an educational institution offered a feeling of solidarity and empowerment for critical, active minorities, but also a 'system acceptance with reservations' (Friedenthal-Haase, 2007, p. 435; translated by the authors) – a pressure release valve, wherein oppressive structures of the GDR could be criticised, but not in a way that any change was likely to result.

This overview reveals a differentiated picture of adult education in the GDR. In addition to indoctrinative education, there were programs that made it easier for many participants to gain access not only to education and culture (Gieseke & Opelt, 2003), but also to certain professions that otherwise would not have been possible (Friedenthal-Haase, 2007; Opelt, 2004). While there were attempts to organise educational opportunities that operated outside the realm of state control (e.g., Protestant Academies), it is undeniable that the education system was centralised and controlled by the state. Educational programmes and organised leisure activities were to be carried out uniformly (in terms of content and methods), and the targeted selection only of loyal groups and individuals for certain educational opportunities ensured a measure of loyalty to the

system, whether through the creation of dependency or through guaranteed privileges (Hoggan-Kloubert & Luthardt, 2022).

Participants in adult education in the GDR

The GDR, as a new nation state, faced the challenge of finding suitable specialists, in both professional and ideological respects. According to the state doctrine, a 'new intelligentsia' should come primarily from among the workers and farmers, for which purpose the worker and farmer faculties (Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultäten) were established at various universities (Miethe, 2007). To foster the 'new socialist personality' and to cultivate individuals who embraced the Marxist-Leninist worldview, the regime aimed to provide access to university studies in specialized preparatory institutions for those talented individuals who demonstrated unwavering political loyalty (Siebert, 1970, p. 42). Those institutions sought to shape the new 'all-round developed socialist personality' capable of 'building socialism' and embracing a 'broad cultural horizon' (Lemke, 1980, p. 22; translated by the authors).

Worth mentioning are the numerous initiatives to use mass media for cultural and professional education. As early as 1949, the Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk broadcasting network began airing the 'Funkhochschule' (Wireless University). The programs were a prescribed part of the obligatory discussion rounds at the VHS, the FDJ (The Free German Youth, a communist youth organisation) and the FDGB (The Free German Trade Union Confederation) (Siebert, 1970, p. 43).

In addition to the workers and farmers, other target groups were also the focus of educational efforts. Adult education centres held regular seminars for parents, with the aim of ensuring uniform ideological education at school and at home (Siebert, 1970, p. 44). From the point of view of the state apparatus, the lecturers in adult education also needed additional special pedagogical qualifications so that 'capable skilled workers, administrative employees, teachers, intellectuals and officials of the parties and mass organizations (could) be systematically prepared for their work as adult education centre lecturers through courses on technical, social and methodological questions' with special focus was placed on 'activist training', that would increase enthusiasm for work and political ideology in work collectives (Direktorenkonferenz in Thüringen, 1950, as cited in Siebert, 1970, pp. 49-50; translated by the authors). The lack of qualified workers led to an increased focus on women's qualifications; women were expected, under the mantra of equal rights, to take up work in industry, agriculture, and educational professions.

Adult education in the GDR from the perspective of practitioners

To supplement our understanding of adult education during the important historical epoch of the GDR, we gathered subjective perspectives, personal experiences, and reflections from adult education practitioners who worked in the GDR during the period between 1949 and 1990. The following section describes essential features of the data collection process and then presents relevant findings.

A purposive sample of six individuals, recruited through social networks, was selected for this study based on their experiences of having worked in adult education in the GDR. The sample consisted of three men and three women, who were between 65 and 80 years old when the interviews were conducted in 2022. The range of institutions described above (i.e., VHS, university further education, cultural education, church education) were represented. As this study sought to understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals from the former GDR, qualitative interviews were chosen as

the primary method of data collection, as they provide an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and are well suited for exploring sensitive topics (Flick, 2019). The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and protected.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews of approximately two hours in length were conducted with each participant. These interviews were conducted in German and held via Zoom. The interview questions were open-ended and flexible, allowing for the participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives in their own words. These discussions were recorded and transcribed, after which we used a thematic analysis approach to identify common themes and patterns (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). The analysis was performed by two independent coders and checked for inter-rater reliability. The results of the analysis were compared and discussed to arrive at a final set of themes and patterns that we felt would accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Quotations selected for inclusion in this article were translated by us into English.

The statements made in the interviews represent perspectives that are subjective and biographical, and which have been reassessed by distance in time and social and political situations since the fall of the GDR. Their experiences as learners and later as educators ensured, we hoped, that they possessed a sound understanding of adult education as a profession, encompassing its underlying theories and practical implementation. Consequently, their responses were informed by an expert's viewpoint on adult education, rendering their insights invaluable in shedding light on the nuances of the educational landscape during that period.

Among the findings are two relevant themes: (1) 'Learning society': Opportunities, access, and control of learning; and (2) Coexistence of conformity and resistance. These themes are explored more fully below.

'Learning society': Opportunities, access, and control of learning

The interviewees described attempts of the GDR to create an institutional, legal-financial framework and a general 'learning climate' (Eduard, line 105) in the country, with various learning incentives to ensure lifelong learning of its citizens and thereby shape learners into the ideal socialist personality. Alongside their perceived need – and even 'hunger' (Sylvia, lines 17, 54) – for education, participants also spoke of the compulsion to learn (in the workplace, as well as in political and ideological training courses). On the one hand, participants talked about how the system of learning for adults in the GDR was institutionally diversified and had low barriers to entry for many groups (through e.g., learning on the job, educational leave, paid educational offerings), but on the other hand, access to adult education, workplace training, and higher education was linked to one's loyalty to the state ideology rather than to one's own achievements, educational needs, or interests.

> There were many visa applications [to West Germany]. These lists were counter-checked by our manager [at the VHS]. Who is the applicant? For courses such as English or mechanical engineering, we checked for those [who applied for a visa], and they would not be admitted. (We would tell them that) the course was full or distributed differently. [...] It was the same with the [post-high school diploma], without a referral there was no place at the Volkshochschule. It wasn't that easy. […] Applicants have been rejected. There was always a political background to it. (Gesina, lines 160-165)

Similarly, we find evidence of restricted access to education in other interviews. One interviewee comes from a family that was critical of the system and where reading and discussion were common practices. As a result, her access to education was heavily restricted. 'I actually wanted to study psychology … but they told me clearly here: 'It's not your grades, not your evaluations. It's your social background that doesn't allow it' (Frieda, lines 12-15).

Similarly, another interviewee remembers having a strong desire to enrol in German Studies but had reservations about her eligibility due to her parents' social background. The societal emphasis on the working class as the preferred source of talent created uncertainties and limitations for those outside this classification. She highlighted the pressure to be loyal to the system, even in selecting a profession. Propaganda machinery heavily influenced career choices, particularly for women. Technical professions such as electronics, cybernetics, and engineering were promoted, while others, like German Studies, were discouraged. This interviewee acknowledged succumbing to societal expectations and choosing a technical profession, only to later regret her decision.

> It has come back to haunt me. I didn't feel good about it. I should have thought for myself as an individual, but the times were such that independent thinking was not an option. I surrendered myself to the direction that was dictated. … We were all led like sheep. I was one of them. (Sylvia, lines 70-74)

Another participant discussed the mandatory political and ideological dimension that was present in all forms of education in the GDR. This ideology, as he described it, centred around communism and the belief that people are inherently good and can change the world to create a better future. However, he felt that this idealistic view of people was not realistic, and that this mandatory ideology was more of an obligation rather than a genuine belief. Eduard described this political ideology as being present in all academic subjects and was also fostered in department and union meetings. The direction and teachings of the ideology were predetermined:

> There were these rules we had to follow, and even the stuff we learned in our studies was all laid out for us. It was all about communism and all that jazz. If you think about it, they were these big, grand ideals we were supposed to embrace. 'Man is good and changes everything, and we strive for a blooming future.' That's what I heard, and I thought: 'Stay on the carpet.' Man is contradictory and cannot be educated to the ideal. It was a compulsory exercise. … It was included in all academic subjects. This continued in the department meetings, union meetings. The political orientation was maintained. The direction was already given. (Eduard, lines 89-96)

Eduard also reflected on the limited diversity of thought and freedom of expression at his institution. 'There was nothing else. There was no possibility of being different. There was no plurality of thinking. That was restricted. One had to walk only on this one path. Everything else brought one into danger' (Eduard, lines 65-68). There was only one approved way of thinking, and any deviation from that path was perceived as dangerous. Frieda remembered: 'With the reunification, I had a sense of being able to act as an adult, to truly behave as an adult. No longer bound by the state context, and yes, acting with a certain defiance, with resistance' (Frieda, lines 100-102). The sentiment of newfound adulthood, liberated from the constraints of the state, reflects a transition from a paternalistic structure to a more autonomous and self-directed existence and also learning. Eduard similarly reflected that although during the GDR era people enjoyed aspects such as employment, free education, and engaging lectures, upon post-reunification there was a profound realisation of the limitations imposed during the GDR, leading to a re-

evaluation of the experiences of unfreedom and a deeper understanding of the constraints that shaped their lives during that period.

Coexistence of conformity and resistance

The fact that state adult education had an obligatory political and ideological dimension was mentioned in many interviews. However, our participants reported that learners and lecturers had developed a certain critical distance from their imposed ideology, sometimes even bordering on cynicism.

> There was no longer any belief. It was a sarcastic, pragmatic way of doing things because you had to do it. … But it was also about doing it right. Representing the logarithms correctly, regardless of the truth. … Everyone knew what was going on, but you had to pretend and use the right terms. (Felix, lines 134-137)

Another interviewee gave a similar response:

> There was political-ideological training that ran throughout one's life and was mandated by the state. It was seen as irrevocable by many people. It was eaten by many people. You waited until it was over. Ways to circumvent it were looked at, but they were very minor. … I made the best of it. I wasn't swimming against the tide; that's how you dug your own grave. Every effort was made not to end up on the blacklist. (Eduard, lines 24-28)

In all interviews, the role of the church, the student community, or the Protestant Academies was emphasized as a counterpart or compensation to the system-compliant adult education organised and controlled by the state. It was seen as a form of 'substitute education', a way to compensate for the limitations and constraints of the official system: 'That was the alternative: great freedom on a small scale' (Felix, lines 150-152). In essence, these institutions provided a space where individuals could experience an educational environment that offered more opportunities for independent thinking and even dissent.

However, the Protestant Academies as a space for education and criticality was also described as stabilising the overall system; it was a valve that made it possible to endure the reality of the GDR. One participant described church education in both functions: as a call to maturity (*Mündigkeit*) and emancipation, but also as pacification, or *soundproofing*.

> So in the church area, adult education has done a lot for language skills, for maturity, for self-confidence, independence from ideological guidelines, and also for a home. Stay in the country and fight back every day ..., but that stabilised the system and did not lead to a critical change. (Felix, lines 175-178)

Some participants pointed out that there were also opportunities in the GDR to hear different perspectives and to be critical of the regime. When asked whether it was possible to educate oneself if one wanted to, one interviewee responded that you could educate yourself freely in the GDR if you wanted to, but added that such a free education was linked to certain prerequisites. You had to 'come from a middle-class family, with many books and musical instruments', to 'know certain people' (writers, musicians, libraries or booksellers), and have financial security (e.g., through a solid income of the spouse). 'Anyone who had no access to certain educational institutions or people who had a certain (educational) level had lost' (Sylvia, lines 90-95). But she also adds self-critically:

> If I had been processed properly, at 15-16, I don't know where I would have ended up. I can't put my hand in the fire for that. If I hadn't had a middle-class family home, if I had grown up in a family with party bosses, I was very enthusiastic, you could have inspired me. (Sylvia, lines 110-113)

The fear of consequences was also mentioned , which in retrospect aroused feelings of shame because of his adaptive behaviours, further emphasizing the ethical and emotional dilemmas individuals in the GDR faced.

> There was fear of reprisals. That's why you went along with everything. Adaptation was the order of the day. Personally, one was not proud of it, one was also ashamed of it, but in the interest of one's own continued existence and to avert difficulties from the family, one adapted and swam to some extent with the current. (Eduard, lines 40-44)

Two interviewees highlighted that within circles related to Lutheran churches there were spaces for critical discourse – spaces of encounter, small alternative public spaces. They spoke about 'Mit-Öffentlichkeit' (Frieda, line 64; Felix, line 160), a concept that was not a counter-public but rather a co-public; it radiated outward. These spaces existed within the framework of the church, through lectures or discussion groups that addressed spiritual and life-related questions.

> Our teacher recently told me that they avoided using the term 'adult education' since it was reserved for the state-controlled sphere. Education was not the domain of the church; it was not allowed to be. Instead, the focus was on pastoral care. (Frieda, lines 80-82)

By framing these educational spaces in terms of pastoral care rather than adult education, the church was able to create spaces that fostered intellectual exploration while avoiding direct confrontation with the regime's control over the education sector. This highlights a complex interplay between conformity and resistance ('zwischen Anpassung und Widerstand' as Friedenthal-Haase (2007) expressed it), as participants navigated the ideological landscape while maintaining a sense of agency within the existing societal structures.

> Self-education was at the heart of all education. It occurred continuously and was often unnamed. For example, we read books recommended by bookshop owners whom we knew. We would pass on the books and transcribe them with three carbon copies. A friend would copy them, and then we would distribute them as a form of self-education through book sharing. (Frieda, lines 25-28)

This quotation exemplifies the resourcefulness and resilience of individuals in their pursuit of intellectual growth. While formal education may have been tightly regulated and limited by ideological constraints, individuals actively sought out alternative sources of knowledge.

Discussion of the findings

In our critique of the GDR, we do not mean to imply that democracies in the West were thriving according to their principles and ideals. In many ways, they were not and still do not. Nevertheless, if we are to pursue democracy as a project and strive for its ideals, then adult education is a necessity. And, not just any system of adult education, as it *per se* does not necessarily support democracy. When used as a tool of control, the very essence of education becomes warped, and it morphs into indoctrination. The case of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) helps us to recognise the inherent contradictions within the

GDR's approach to education, contrasting the regime's vision of a 'totalitarian learning society' with the fundamental principles of adult education in the service of democracy.

As shown in our *first finding*, the demand for shaping society and guiding people manifested itself in the vision of a totalitarian learning society (Siebert, 1970). Participation in state-organised adult education events, anchored by the legal regulations on education, was often not voluntary. The right to education, which was proclaimed in the three constitutions of the GDR (in 1949, 1968, and 1974), pursued the goal of shaping socialist personalities through education, and of providing the working class with supposedly sufficient qualifications to meet the requirements of the economy through compulsory general and specialised education. The right to education was therefore not a right to opt in or out of one's desired educational offerings and did not offer open and free access to educational institutions. Rather, this right was manifested in compulsory education, which was explicitly described in the Labor Code of the GDR. Every working person had 'the honourable duty to constantly educate themselves in accordance with the higher requirements resulting from social development, in particular economic and technical progress' (Arbeitsgesetzbuch, 1977, Paragraph 1) or the duty, to 'participate in qualification measures that are part of his job' (Paragraph 2; translated by the authors). The working people were not only asked to take part in qualification courses, but they also had an obligation to society to attend the courses regularly and with the greatest possible success. This runs counter to the emancipatory tradition of adult education as mentioned in the beginning of the article, which requires that adult education recognise an adult person as autonomous and self-determined, not an object to be used in the furtherance of others' will or even of a supposed higher purpose.

Education, even the education of adults, can never be completely free from all forms of intended and goal-oriented influences. But adult education in the service of democracy can and should be an open-ended-process, not one predetermined by external forces while bypassing the will of an individual. We define the goal of education as supporting an active, autonomous ('mündig') person in the interaction with his/her material and social environments (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2021). The main goal of education (understood in the tradition of Humboldt, see Benner, 2003) is to foster an individual's unique identity and fortify their capabilities, and therefore not allowing a person to be the object of any extrinsic visions of an individual. It is thus an open, self-reflective, never-ending process involving self-development through encounters with pluralism. According to Horkheimer (1981), education is a pursuit of inner freedom, 'The desire for education (*Bildung*) contains this will to become powerful of oneself, to be not dependent on blind powers, of apparent ideas, of obsolete concepts, of dismissed views and illusions' (p. 160; translated by the authors). Furthermore, the central aspect of this *Bildung* tradition is the critical attitude towards the tendency of instrumentalism in educational policy and educational concepts. Hufer (2016) claims:

> To my mind, civic education is always critical, otherwise it would be neither civic nor education. It would be training, indoctrination or agitation with the aim of forcing the participants to conform, it would not be education, but their opposite. (p. 120; translated by the authors)

One important and hopeful insight can be gleaned from our *second finding*, which is that the educational efforts of the GDR often did not yield the desired outcomes. Benecke (2022) notes that the socialist education system could not produce the envisioned socialist personality (p. 17); the aspired consolidation of power did not achieve the efficiency demanded by the SED-party. Throughout the existence of the GDR, disparities between educational programmes, expectations of education, and their actual implementation

became apparent. The data presented in this article reveal that educators developed a certain critical distance, sometimes bordering on cynicism, towards the system (see also Tenorth, 2022, pp. 61-62); they describe their compliance (unwitting, often remembered with shame), but not a succumbing to the ideology. Summarising the impact of the work of adult educators in the GDR, Siebert (2001) characterises it as a lesson that we all can learn from history. 'Sometimes, it is comforting to know that adult education achieves less than the actors desire. There exists an intelligent resistance to adult learning' (p. 292; translated by the authors). Siebert's assessment highlights the existence of a discerning and critical mindset among adults, one that resisted complete assimilation into the ideological constructs imposed upon them.

A democracy functioning according to its ideals, where citizens are active co-shapers of their shared social and political worlds, requires high cognitive demands. In such a system, we would have to grapple with complex societal debates, and there can be a temptation to avoid this complexity. Adult education should be wary of pedagogical approaches that offer relief from struggle through simple solutions, pulling learners into the trap of a single worldview imposed from the outside. In educational contexts where dissenting voices risk marginalisation or cancellation, reflection and critical thinking are suppressed, leaving a person with a feeling of a fractured self, sometimes with a feeling of guilt and consciousness splitting, resulting from internal conflicts or external coercion (Milosz, 1953).

Conclusion

It would be too simplistic to say that adult education in the GDR was bad and contemporary Western education is good. In many respects, adult education in the GDR was extensive, innovative, and impressive; it demonstrated a comprehensive approach in terms of systematic planning and resource allocation. However, the GDR, because of its explicitness in trying to use education to promote a particular type of human development, did not support the (autonomous) individual as such, but rather addressed people only as servants of the system and in their usefulness for a particular sphere of a society (e.g., industry). And, this philosophy and practice undermined adult education's role in the service of democracy, by hindering the development of the civic capacities needed for a person to be a co-shaper of their worlds (and not only a silent spectator or obedient follower). Even though adult education can provide positive outcomes and be successful in various aspects, it can at the same time be used to undermine democracy and support anti-democratic aims.

As Fritze (2008) points out, even in democracies, political propaganda and attempts at mental manipulation are common. The key difference between an ideology-driven dictatorship and a democracy lies in the fact that in a pluralistic society, individuals are confronted with diverse ideas, opinions, and beliefs, and they must independently navigate and make their own choices. On the other hand, in a totalitarian regime, individuals are confronted with a single source of information, pervasive propaganda, and a monopoly on education. In an ideology-driven dictatorship, the conditions that facilitate critical and autonomous thinking and belief formation are deliberately and systematically undermined.

In the totalitarian state which the GDR was, the availability and pretended variety of learning opportunities served as camouflage, a simulation of democratic structures for external demonstration and internal propaganda. The *forming* of the desired socialistic personality was also used to ensure the preservation of the system while creating loyal followers and system adherents (Brock, 2006). The pressures of conformity and influence

of propaganda machinery underscore the profound impact of totalitarianism on the educational landscape. Adult education was a mechanism to suppress subversive internal forces from the outset or to change their minds. In this sense, it stabilised a non-democratic system.

Of course, every institution of adult education (in e.g., industry, higher education, agriculture, government, healthcare, libraries, or unions), will have a particular orientation to the learning needs within its sphere, but they also all have a larger responsibility to facilitate individual (and therefore also group and societal) development. And, this development requires active participation and decision-making. The development of democratic citizens who are capable of co-participation in and co-shaping of their shared social and political worlds cannot be accomplished through indoctrination, through dictating *truth* and unilaterally determining how people should think and act.

This case study explores a crucial systemic issue that has both historical and contemporary relevance to the field of adult education, namely the distinction between education and indoctrination, between the facilitation of learning and the exertion of control, and between the empowerment of individuals and the oppression of society. It is important for individuals and institutions involved in educational scholarship and practice to remain vigilant, critically evaluating their own practices and principles to ensure they are not undermining democracy and its necessary concomitants of freedom, solidarity, and access to knowledge. In most situations, we are not confronted with a federal government that is seeking to indoctrinate a whole society through adult education; the danger of totalitarianism does not necessarily have to manifest that way. We do, however, face more subtle tendencies and pressures that serve the same anti-democratic purposes. As this article describes, we need to be aware of and resist pressures to conformity, where ideologies (whether left- or right-leaning) are held as sacrosanct, and where dissenters are 'cancelled'. We need to ensure in our practices that human dignity is upheld, particularly regarding every individual person being respected and valuable *qua human beings*, and not valued solely for their usefulness to the organization or a cause (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023). We need to ensure that complex human and societal problems are not treated simplistically, resulting in dichotomous categorisations of right/wrong, good/bad, us/them. Such dualisms lead to a dangerous polarisation, which precludes democracy from functioning (Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023, pp. 366-377). If we view democracy as the active co-shaping of the shared social and political world, then our practices as adult educators need to foster the development of those capacities.

Notes

[1] Siebert's work, an attempt at a comprehensive study of adult education in the GDR, is an important source for understanding the historical context. We draw heavily on Siebert's extensive research because of its robust grounding in primary sources, supported by his personal visits to the GDR. In doing so, we acknowledge that Siebert's research took place during the Cold War era, a period marked by heightened ideological tensions. As such, his perspective was undoubtedly influenced by the polarized political climate of the time.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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